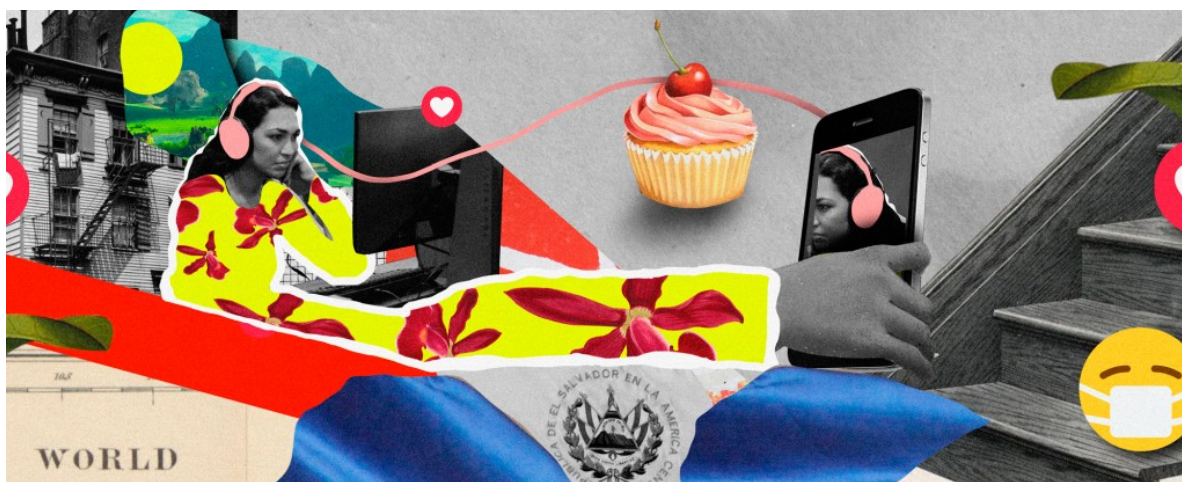


DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION ACTORS

Operation Mycelium: global challenges and transnational Salvadoran youth

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Illustrator: [Hansel Obando](#)

I never imagined living through a global emergency, nor the repercussions involved for our ways of life. But since the quarantine began in our country, I have seen my life from another land. At the beginning I didn't perceive any major changes, only the fact of being ordered to stay at home. I didn't think it would last very long, that the pandemic would soon be over; it seemed to be a virus like any other. However, the media replaced my confidence with fear and confusion, and soon it was no longer just about health, but about politics and cultural transformation.

Luis, aged 27

When we talk about "global challenges" for the new millennium, it is the reflections of experts from international organisations, academia and non-governmental organisations that usually come to mind. Many of these reflections have warned us of climate change, the water crisis, famine, violence, poverty, inequality, exclusion and other problems that

threaten, not only human life, but the biodiversity of the planet [1]. When we talk about “youth”, it is much the same. In 2015, a group of ECLAC experts proposed a study of the reality for young people in Latin America and the challenges of achieving development with equality. At that time, the study posed two major challenges: guaranteeing the rights and responding to the demands of young people who find themselves in spaces in which their voices are not heard, and considering young people as fundamental actors for development, making them participants in this process [2].

Based on the challenges identified by this study, we believe that the topic of “Youth and Global Challenges” should be considered on the basis of the experiences and voices of young people. The starting point for this text is an activity conducted with young people in El Salvador in June 2020, during the confinement imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main objective of the exercise was to gather information on daily routines and cultural consumption in pandemic times. The process involved the construction of a personal text and then a collective work based on a survey. The responses generated made it possible to identify a challenge the experts have barely mentioned: the urgent need to transform our day-to-day relationship model.

Common challenge: reviewing our relationship model

Rather than global challenges, we wish to reflect on a common challenge. While the adjective *global* relates to the planet or the whole world, common means belonging to or involving the whole community of people or things. And this is the point we wish to underline: thinking about common rather than global causes involves all people, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion or ideology. Global problems generate common challenges. And, in this case, we wish to emphasise the enormous challenge of our day-to-day coexistence model. Many approaches to the coexistence model have been proposed. However, having listened to and reviewed the perspectives of young Salvadorans, we wish to highlight two approaches that we consider fundamental.

The first approach is proposed by the Brazilian philosopher and theologian Leonardo Boff, who asserts that the ecological, social, economic and political crisis confronting the planet today is the result of the primacy of a coexistence model based on conquest and domination [3]. To reverse the current crisis, human beings need to re-establish their relationship with themselves, with others, with nature and with the transcendent meaning of life as the basis for a coexistence model based on care and respect. However, re-establishing the relationship between human beings and their environment will not be a spontaneous process; we aware that it will mean setting in motion a structuring energy capable of transforming all our relationships.

Global problems generate common challenges. And, in this case, we wish to emphasise the enormous challenge of our day-to-day coexistence model

The second coexistence proposal is taken from the book: *The power of partnership: seven relationships that will change your life* [4]. In this work, Austrian intellectual Riane Eisler states that, in order to transform the everyday coexistence model, a cultural transformation of four basic components of the current social model is needed. The first of these is the shift from a hierarchical domination structure to an egalitarian structure based on collaborative nexuses of mutual care. The second involves empathy, non-violence and care as values to be embraced by the whole of humanity, as opposed to primarily by women. The third proposes the eradication of violence and fear as control mechanisms, instead maintaining social cohesion through trust and respect. The fourth and final component suggests anchoring the notion of morality in respect for otherness and not in the control and domination of others. This transformation, Eisler points out, is expressed in seven fundamental human relationships: the relationship with oneself; intimate relationships (family, partner, friends); relationships in the local community and in the workplace; relationships with the countrywide and the international community; and relationships with nature and spirituality.

Our experience

El Salvador experienced one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in Latin America. The complete reclusion and isolation period of the lockdown – which lasted from March to August 2020 – was experienced with a mixture of sensations and feelings. On the one hand, the lower working classes were confronted with the anxiety of having to look for alternative ways to make a living, making the reclusion order a kind of rule that had to be broken in order to survive. On the other hand, in the lower and middle classes with a fixed income per family, there was a perceptible kind of excitement at the thought of spending thirty days without having to leave home or be subject to institutional routines and schedules. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the Salvadoran people were intensely afraid. This was primarily due to the authoritarian measures adopted by the government during the pandemic, as well as a lack of accurate information about COVID-19.

Shortly before the two-month mark of the long quarantine, a group of teachers and students decided to do something to understand how what was happening in the world was affecting our ways of understanding each other in our small territory. Initially motivated by an academic objective, the initiative also became a therapeutic process: we had to construct meaning amid the day-to-day chaos, and to do so we had to start by listening to ourselves. It was necessary to ask questions, document, review and build an archive of our own.

The first task consisted of each participant writing a short self-reflective text about their daily routines under lockdown. What we shared in those texts enabled us to see that the impact of the pandemic was changing something in the way we related to each other. It seemed that our physical, mental and spiritual health depended on a relationship model based on mutual care, collaboration and respect. We also realised that we had not arrived at this transformation without conflict or negotiation. Nevertheless, the decision and the will to get through this extraordinary time as best we could prevailed.

Almost a year on, the experience is now a kind of allegory of our great common challenge: a review of our relationship model is essential to ensure the present and future of our planet and all the life forms it currently sustains. Without wishing to detract from the breadth of Eisler's proposal, our aim is to present some indications of the long-awaited cultural transformation in at least four of the seven areas of relationships, from the experience of young people in El Salvador.

Relationship with ourselves: discovery

None of us can change everything, but we can all change something, and a good place to start is with ourselves, says Riane Eisler. This was the first relationship to come under the spotlight during lockdown. It was a kind of discovery. In a world of accelerated activity, conscious deliberation and introspection may seem beyond our situation. But the pandemic forced the global capitalist machinery to slow down its processes, allowing us, for a moment, to look inward.

One indication of shifting toward a paradigm of care is learning to feel good and in tune with one's own body. Being in dialogue and generating consensus also leads to increased capacity for pleasure and sensitivity, as Marlen points out:

Thinking about how my body inhabits space in the midst of this pandemic, I have tried to listen to my body and not coerce or browbeat it into strenuous exercise routines. Before the confinement I exercised once or twice a week, doing pole dance or aerial yoga exercises with fabrics. I have tried to maintain this routine. In the midst of the pandemic I have developed a kind of dialogue and consensus with my body. Sometimes my body wants to do nothing and other times it wants to do a lot. My current exercise practice has allowed me to approach my day-to-day biomechanics differently.

Marlen, aged 33

In addition to awareness of healthy eating, reviewing the relationship with the self also involves the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Although in most families the domestic burden during lockdown remained on the shoulders of the women, there were spaces in which small transformations began, such as those shared in the following experience:

Food is another important aspect of my life that has changed. As I said before, I used to eat out all the time, and I was aware of not eating very well because of that. It was hard to find places that sold

clean, home-made food that I liked, so sometimes I would just skip meals. Now, every day I take turns with my dad to cook lunch. This is the part of lockdown that I have most enjoyed, because I enjoy food much more and because I hadn't cooked for a long time, so to find myself cooking again is a great motivator. I make an effort to think about what I can make with what I have, I think about the ingredients I use, and although things don't always turn out as well as I expect, I still think that the more I do it, the better they will get.

Elena, aged 23

Cooking is now a daily task and a chore, but mostly it's a pleasure. Paying attention to choosing the best ingredients and putting them to the best possible use, good flavour and consistency, how the food will be presented and served and who will be eating with us: the whole activity has become more sociable and important and motivates me to cook with love, precision and dedication.

María José, aged 25

A review of our relationship model is essential to ensure the present and future of our planet and all the life forms it currently sustains

A number of studies and surveys showed that this discovery was no exception. Many individuals, families and groups suddenly found themselves confronted with the need to understand and take care of each other. Sickness, death and suffering have altered the tone of human relationships, especially for the young.

Intimate relationships: family, partner, friends. Other relationships are possible.

Eisler affirms that the set of intimate relationships established with family, partners and friends is at the heart of cultural transformation. It is within this intimate nucleus that the current model will either be maintained or a new relationship model based on care, collaboration and mutual respect can begin to take shape. Salvadoran society is

characterised by a strong adult-centric, authoritarian, patriarchal imprint. This is the norm. While the rate of violence and abuse increased during lockdown for many families, some experiences showed indications of more horizontal relationships based on listening and mutual respect. This was the extraordinary exception that shows that other models are possible, even in a society that is violent and authoritarian:

I can identify four modifications to my routine since the lockdown began, two negative and two positive. Positive changes were restoring communication with my family, which had taken a back seat, and acquiring a liking for video games, which allowed me to be part of a new community, share moments with my siblings and socialise in a different way.

Ale, aged 30

Now, the family says hi to each other and makes video calls, which we never did before. And on Fridays we chat about the film I share with them every Monday. I had never experienced sharing things I liked with my family. When it's coffee and pastry time, we pretend we're drinking it in some palace and visit museums of the world on Google Art.

Diana, aged 30

Now, because of the lockdown, I really have to coexist with other people. This quickly led to conflicts, especially with my sister: we argued about who should do the household chores, who was using the computer and, since my house is small, we even argued about resting in certain places. Because I was used to living alone, the mere presence of others made me uncomfortable, as if they were invading my space. Although it was difficult to begin with, we have gradually learned to manage the situation: we drew up schedules to take turns doing the different chores, and we are understanding about who needs to use the computer the most. The positive side is that our relationship has improved because we spend more time with each other.

Elena, aged 23

Un altre indicati d'acostament al model de relacions sustentat en la cura, la col·laboració i el respecte mutu està vinculat a les relacions d'amistat. L'experiència generada pel confinament va permetre un nivell de comunicació que va transcendir la camaraderia i va permetre endinsar-se en els vincles a partir de compartir experiències:

The third aspect that has changed is my relationship with my friends. Before the lockdown we used to get together all the time to play board games and talk, or play Pokémon GO. We used to go out to eat together, too, as several of them are also students at UES [University of El Salvador]. Now we get together most nights via video games that include voice chat. So while we're playing we're listening to the experiences of the others. If we want to play other types of games, we make video calls.

Elena, aged 23

After eating and doing the chores, either washing the dishes or filling water bottles (according to the weekly turns I take with my sister), I would spend half the afternoon taking a course in elementary Greek - my proposal for the congress required Greek mythology and I wanted to learn how to read classical Greek - and the other half playing board games or video games with my cousins. The evening would start with dinner and watching the news, followed by watching anime or narrative analysis and cookery videos on YouTube. Then at bedtime I would always chat to my friends and we would tell each other about our day.

Kevin, aged 23

In contrast to the more determinist and distrustful view of technology, this research allowed us to document technology as an interface that connects, mediates and builds relationships.

Our workplace and local community relations, with technology at the core

Distrust of others was among the most intense experiences we lived during the lockdown imposed by the pandemic. In a country like El Salvador, this distrust was already well established by numerous forms of violence, but was reinforced for reasons of hygiene, to keep us safe. Technology became the new meeting place, the new certainty.

In the past, I didn't use to wash or disinfect my hands every half hour, or disinfect practically everything I bought, or maintain a social distance, or think of others as my "enemies" as potential carriers of the virus. It changed my life overnight: my life, my goals and, naturally, my personality.

Luis, aged 27

The current relationship model exacerbated our fears and turned any neighbour or co-worker into a threat, as happened with healthcare staff working on the front line. On the other hand, as if in a parallel world, there were other experiences that were small signs of hope along the path to the transformation of relationships. Trust, respect and collaboration are possible, even in the virtual world:

I thought it was right to talk about video games because, though technology is part of my life, I never focused on gaming: I never thought it was my thing and it seemed a waste of time. But right now I consider it the biggest modifier of my cultural routine. Gaming enabled me to interact in a way that I was unfamiliar with, make new friends and test many of my skills. Now I am an active video gamer, spending one to two hours a day playing different games, not counting the time I spend in chat groups to learn more about the different game modes and the community in general.

Ale, aged 30

In the same way, my experience with technological applications and strategies has changed completely. As a teacher I have three virtual classrooms, I make video calls and I have a virtual segment from my cultural area. So I decided to sign up to follow young people working from home and find out more about their methods.

Diana, aged 30

The people we share territorial space with – whether in the neighbourhood or at work – become family in the sense that we interact with them on a daily basis. In some cases, lockdown forced us to reconnect with our neighbours to survive:

The lack of work and loss of income in my family got my mother and I thinking about making typical Salvadoran dishes and selling them in the colonia [5]. Initially this was quite difficult for me: we were not used to making most of the dishes. But this spurred me on to look at videos and recipes on the internet, ask questions, make notes, experiment and improvise to prepare good food. I thought these recipes, handed down from generation to generation, were important to the enjoyment of Salvadorans, and it seemed wrong not to know how to make them. Now – thanks to practice and routine, trial and error, patience, imagination and improvisation – it has become easy, interesting and satisfying for me to cook these specialities, and other appetising dishes that I try to cook regularly. And the enterprise has provided income for my family, and gratification for my neighbours.

María José, aged 25

The solutions to global problems lie in shifting our day-to-day relationships toward a different relationship model: the collaborative solidarity model

Although there were experiences of violence and exclusion, in which nurses and doctors were attacked in their own neighbourhoods as potential carriers of the virus, there were also cases in which the inhabitants of the neighbourhood or community organised among themselves to go out and buy food and medicines, and even implement hygiene measures in the shared space. We saw people taking charge of ensuring that food reached the elderly or people with mobility issues, and we felt the need to collaborate with each other to defend ourselves against the pandemic.

Our spiritual relationships

Irrespective of religious denomination, a spiritual relationship suggests the capacity to connect with a dimension that transcends material and physical life. This dimension is reflected in the multiple rituals we engage in as societies around the fundamental

experiences of life: feasting and grieving. The pandemic forced us to migrate to the virtual world, not only to say our last farewells to friends and family, but also to stay connected to the rituals – large or small, collective or personal – that give meaning to our day-to-day lives:

Crowd restrictions changed the face of wakes. Birthdays and Mother's Day were celebrated on video calls instead of in person. Holy Week was spent at home, watching Mass on TV, just as we watched Mass every Sunday on TV.

Eduardo, aged 28

Music has helped me to navigate the oceans of thoughts that hover over me. It is almost a miracle when the hours go by and the day is over. Everything that the pandemic has brought has helped to push me toward the rawest, most truthful knowledge of my own identity, to the struggle for mastery of my own mind and the will to go on living. Thank heavens my daily routines in pandemic times have helped me to transform my life once again and not sink into complaining.

Luis, aged 27

During July 2020, 926 Salvadoran people were surveyed for the present study; 57% of those that responded said they had found spiritual well-being through music. Amid the anxiety, frustration and boredom generated by the lockdown, people achieved a connection with that transcendent dimension through music.

Epilogue

The year 2020 will go down in history as a year full of chaos and uncertainty, but also as a historic moment that will highlight people's unsettling need to continue to live as social beings.

Noé, aged 26

In April 2021, the [ECOSOC Youth Forum](#) invited young participants to give their views on

global challenges. The young people highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health, the environment and food systems. They also stressed the importance of working towards more equitable food systems, and education geared toward food choices that were healthier and more sustainable for both people and the environment.

There is no doubt that the conclusions of the forum point to global problems. We must remember, however, that the solutions to global problems lie in shifting our day-to-day relationships toward a different relationship model: the collaborative solidarity model. That is where we will see the beginnings of positive change in our day-to-day lives and in our world; that is the common challenge. It is interesting to think that this could be possible, in the midst of a pandemic, in a society that for many years has had one of the highest murder rates in the world.

The pandemic forced us to confront our understanding of coexistence: whether as conquest, violence and domination; or as care, respect and collaboration. If we can think of it as an image, let it be that of the mycelium, that subterranean tissue capable of sustaining fungi and connecting plant life to the other kingdoms that coexist in nature. We must connect each person to the potential of the local, national and transnational community and bring about a cultural transformation, the need for which was brought to our attention by the pandemic. This is what Operation Mycelium is all about: changing our ways of being together for ways that are kinder, more human and much more consciously connected.

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